

RICE UNIVERSITY

[D]Urbanism:  
The Revelation of Repressed Transgression

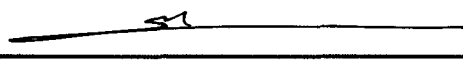
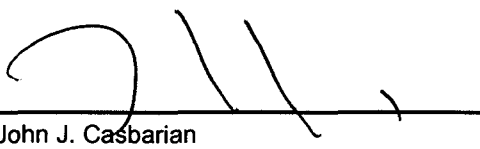
by

Donald Hickey

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

**Master of Architecture**

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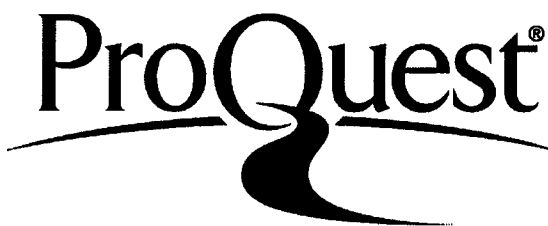
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# ABSTRACT

## [D]Urbanism: The Revelation of Repressed Transgression

Detroit lays stunned as the product of abusive parenting. The loyal workhorse of the American Dream wallows in the dedicated obsolescence of an economic monoculture and fiends for the opiate of capitalism. Yet despite the neglect, a new vitality is brewing amongst the shadows of post-fordist residue. Within the labeled obsolescence breeds a new existence which emerges out of the deviance from the skeletal remains of modern urbanism. A city branded as devastated is actually the epitome of owning the margin.

This thesis amalgamates disenfranchised city islands by accelerating Detroit's underlying and inherent urbanism of transgressive circulation and communication pathways through such techniques as urban scarring, blanketing, disruption, and smoothing. The development does not erase the contemporary attempts at reconciling the norm of the city image but in turn fortifies the inventions spurred by its shortcomings. By reframing a city's legibility, *[D]Urbanism* engenders a new urban ideology attentive to the local collective.

Donald Hickey

January 2010

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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To Eva Franch, for your diligent watch. Without your guidance I would have been lucky to glue my fingers together. Your attention to detail pushed me to places of organization and readiness I never dreamt possible. Sincerely , Thank you.

To my parents, Donald and Janet, I awake every morning feeling blessed and empowered because of your undying love and support. Thank you for instilling in me the values it takes to “finish strong” and the selfless awareness to know when to help another just finish. You are my heroes.

To my sisters, Jenny, Julie, and Sarah, for granting me perspective and sarcasm. Your presences alone have continually steered me in the exact direction upon which I am meant to wander. Having gone before me, I foresee no challenge I can not surmount with your example.

Finally, to my cousin Justin, for being that moment of levity when the weight seems to much to bear. You are truly a great and my best friend. Thank you, for being the Lloyd Christmas to my Harry Dunne.



the revelation of repressed transgression

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# PREFACE

*[D]Urbanism* began as a desire to question the conventional. Not just conventional architecture, but question the way an audience processes information.

The infancy of this thesis sprung from investigations into mental illness. How does Detroit and mental illness relate one may ask? The answer is quite simple. Neither can be cured. Attempts, at least architectural, are futile. The key is not a cure but asking the right question. The things contemporary society labels as “ill” (in need of fixing) are actually just deviations from the “norm,” stigmatized as other. The individual is a product of power, and one’s identity and self concept is created by where he/she locates his/herself according to power. Mental illness is a disruption in that alignment.

Detroit was the epitome of societal expectations/“the norm” at it’s industrial height, but as those expectations changed Detroit became more and more dislocated from that image or “deviant.” Now Detroit suffocates in its own attempts to realign with the contemporary ego. Detroit’s is not defective, it just needs to adjust its constant.

Desires are that which call into question the established order of society, and Detroit is bursting with them; yet, they are repressed for the conviction of an external self. Release the desires.



WOODWARD AVENUE cass corridor



# URBAN CLIMATE chapter 1

Nestled within the Great Lakes, Detroit, Michigan was once the ideal vision of urban ingenuity and American pride. It boasted the forth largest population amongst the States, and defined industry. Its was given such nicknames as the "Motor City," stemming from it dominance in automotive production, and the "Arsenal of Democracy," which grew from its ability to forge nearly all military vehicles during World War II. The city thrived on a nation's desire, but was left cold when those same desires shifted.

Pillaged of physical and intellectual resources, Detroit's population steadily drops as poverty rises. The city deflates from inside-out, creating a clear distinction between an affluent exterior of "haves" and a disoriented interior of "have nots."

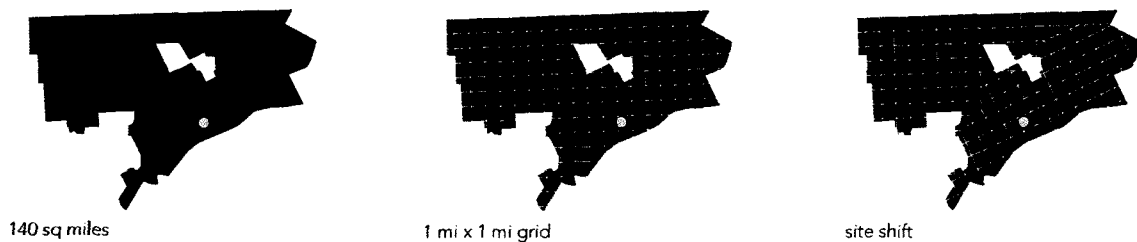
## SUBURBAN DRAIN



## GOVERNANCE DISLOCATION

Encompassed in the city limits, Detroit is nearly 140 square miles, which is setup on the Jeffersonian 1 mile by 1 mile grid. That grid shifts abruptly in the south east to accommodate the strait which separates Detroit from Windsor and the US from Canada.

### EARLY TERRITORIALIZATION



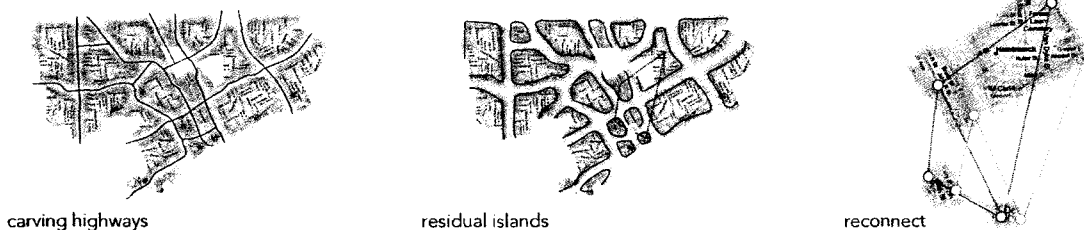
Yet the remarkable impetus for the city's organization stems not from historical territorialization but from the local governments annual injection of funds:



MORE SPENDING ON HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE THAN  
COMMUNITY AND HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

This manifest in an favored highway system that ruthlessly carves the city into isolated and forgotten islands. The experience of Detroit is tailored around these byways, and if one is to stray, he/she is commonly thrust into a frantic scramble to return to its advertised sanctity. Here lies the problem. How can the sequester urban fabric be reframed, revived, and reconnected?

### RESULTING RESIDUE



Detroit is the...



POOREST CITY IN AMERICA WHILE BEING THE MOST EXPENSIVE CITY TO OWN A CAR

Consequently the highways are primarily a bypass for an exterior suburbanite occupation. The astonishing and unwavering commitment to its rapidly shriveling automotive roots augments the schism between governance and popular sentiment. This conceptual image speaks to those disenfranchised masses dwelling within the islands that are defined by yet deprived of the automobile. It illustrates the bewilderment of a populous that struggles with the location of an cohesive identity because they are subjected to a city's self image that is perpetually external. How does one satiate the internal battle of a self alienating body?

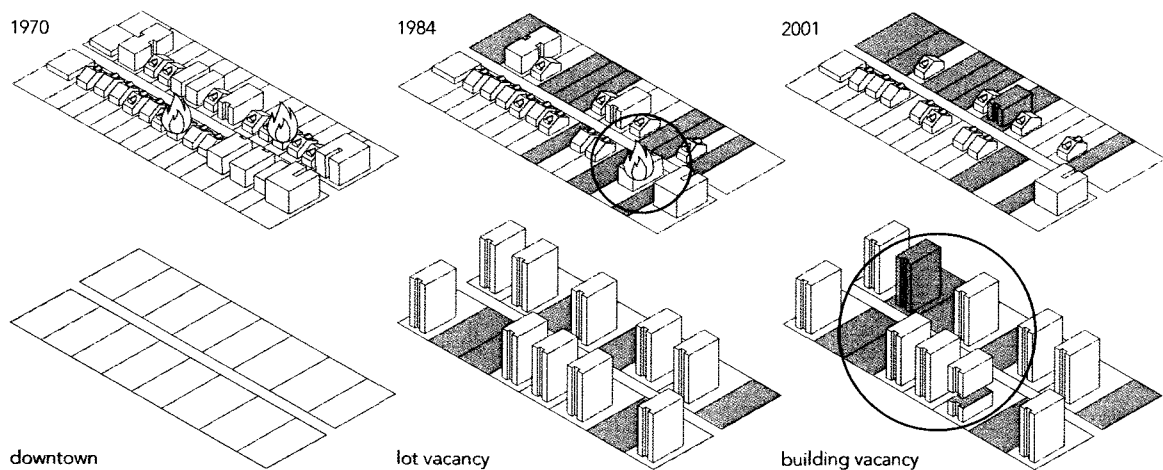
DISENFRANCHIZING HIGHWAYS



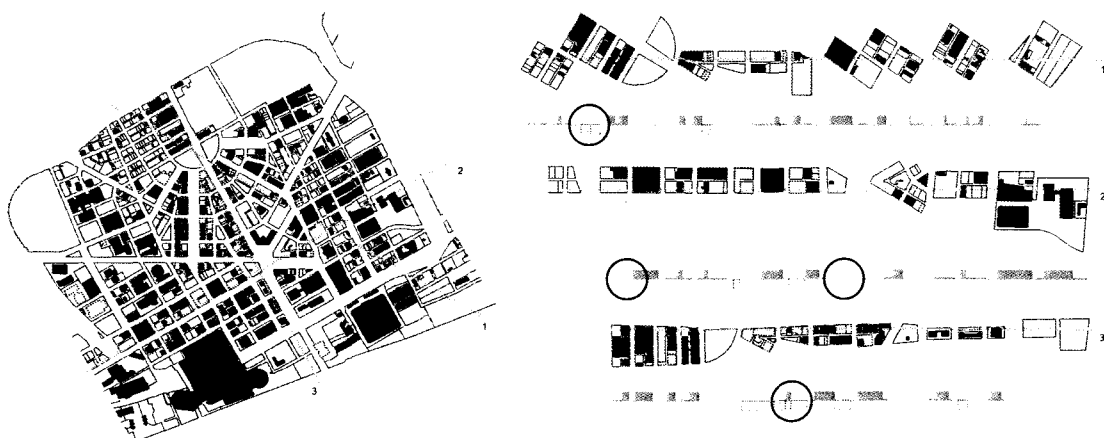
# OCCUPATION DISLOCATION

Over the past 30 years, Detroit has issued 48,000 permits for demolition while only granting 3,500 for building. As the population evacuates for the suburbs, the city quickly became the owners of over 60,000 non-desirable vacant lots. Downtown is riddle with abandoned skyscrapers and is falling victim to an ill planned infusion of recreation program. As the built history is continually erased and not replaced by new, the city resides in a moment of permanent temporariness with no past and no future.

## ABUNDANT VACANCY



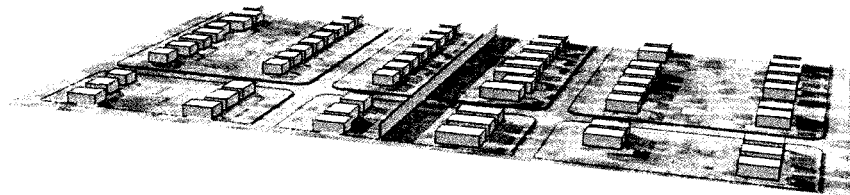
## THINNING CORE



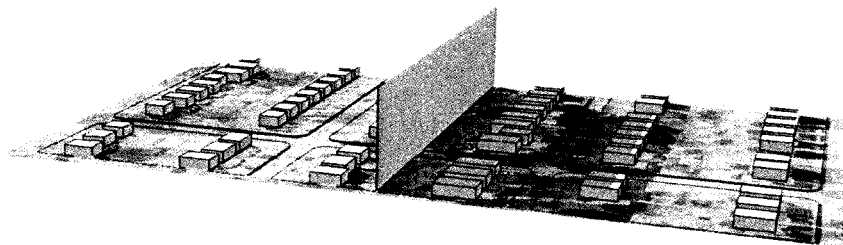
## RACIAL DISLOCATION

Detroit is 82% African American, while the surrounding suburbs are quite the opposite. This is all in part of what was deemed "white flight." As middle class white America gained greater access to automobiles, the majority decided it beneficial to move out of the city to the safety of the suburbs. This created a huge racial and territorial rift between blacks and whites. Demonstrated here clearly in one peripheral neighborhood of Detroit, a 3 feet tall concrete wall was erected by a developer to coax whites to live in proximity to already present African Americans. Accordingly, this divide plays heavily into the political climate that manifested riots in the 1960's, and ethno-centric governing in the 1990's.

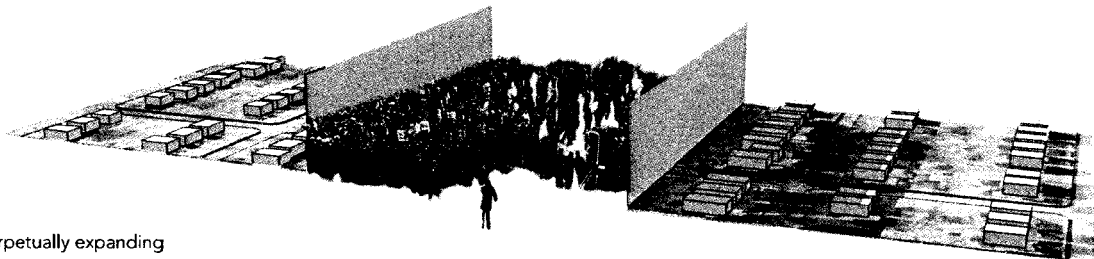
### NEW BERLIN



actual division



perceived division



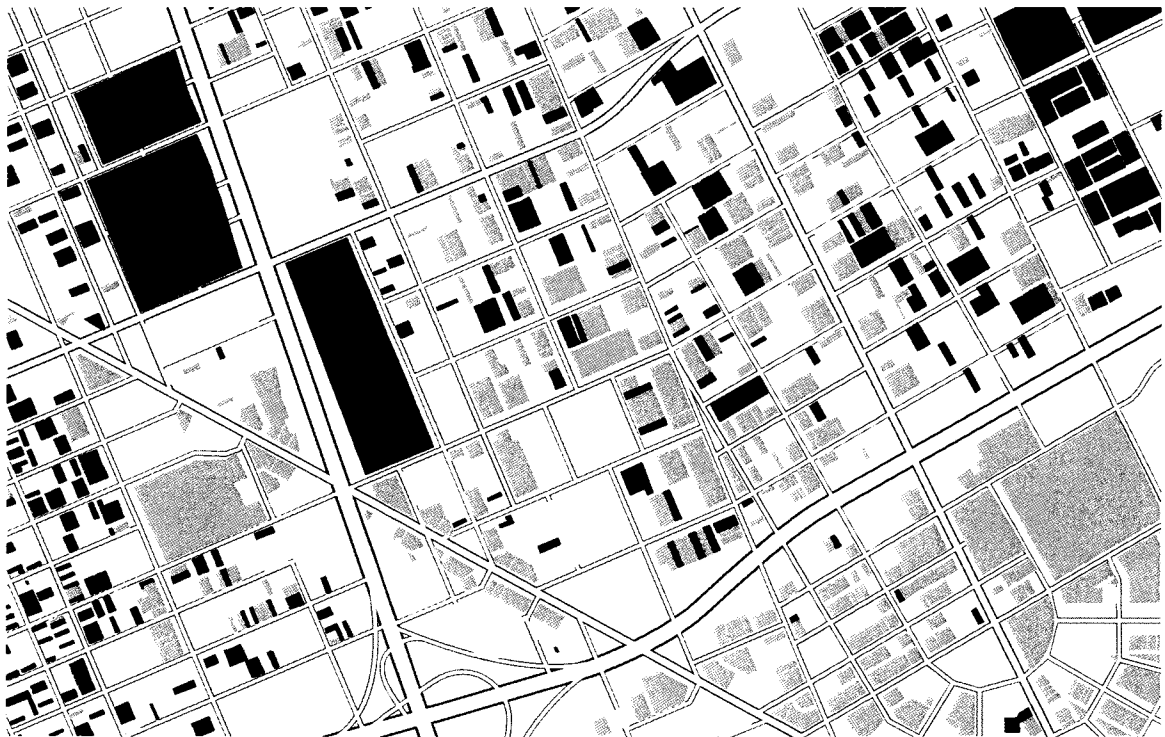
perpetually expanding

## FOCUS CASS CORRIDOR

Located downtown adjacent, Cass Corridor demarcates an area commonly referred to as midtown. Currently it is experiencing a bohemian based revival that is placing high importance on an art community. It houses Wayne State University and the Contemporary Art Museum.

This thesis utilizes a less hopeful slice of the corridor that settles directly next to downtown named Cass Park. It rests in the bend of the I-75 interstate and is overwhelmed by abandonment and poverty. The programmatic makeup consists highly of low end commercial, some light industrial, and a damaged yet varied residential portfolio. The population is mainly African American and once harbored the Young Boys Incorporated (a nationally predominant 1980's drug cartel).

### URBAN ISLAND





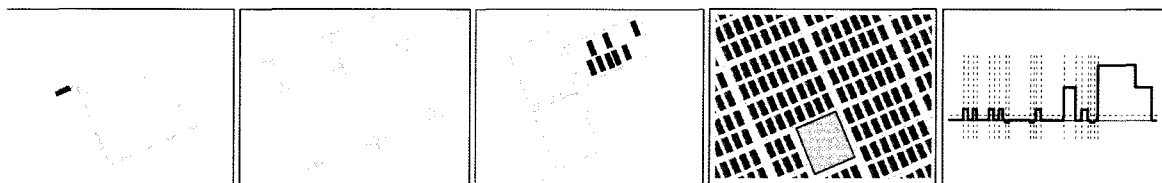
GRAND RIVER AVENUE cass corridor

# THE NORM AND THE DEVIANT chapter 2

The alienation of the populous by Detroit's governance has forced the emergence of a deviant urbanism within the islands that begins to erode and reappropriate the outmoded modernist framework. An sustaining existence is brewing, and it is categorized by reframing the apathetic attempts at constructing the contemporary vision of an desirable city through establishing a new means or definition of efficient inhabitation.

The deviance becomes evident in the comparison of the canonical expectations of the city with its transgressive actuality. Investigating the situation on the basis on 5 integral tools of inhabitation: path, intersection, block, park, and section, allow the discrepancy to be better illuminated. Addressing the two side by side, illustrates the difference between intent and reality, fomenting the forced birth of a mass of urban survivalists.

## CANONICAL



path

intersection

block

park

section



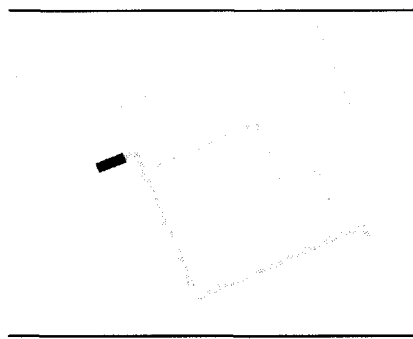
## TRANSGRESSIVE



## PATH URBAN CRITERIA

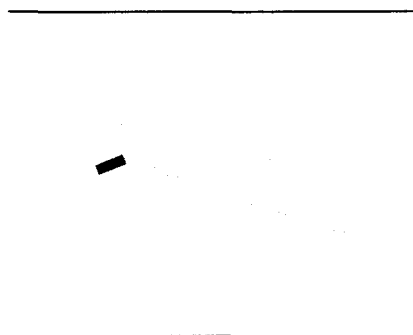
First, we venture onto the canonical path, which manifests itself as an automotive array. The multiplicity of route and its rather indifferent nature creates infinite ways to circulate from one place to another. This organization is based on obtaining leisure and exercising choice, allowing the participant to create his/her own preferential route.

CANONICAL PATH automotive array



On the contrary, the transgressive development is defined by the desire scar, which ignores existing infrastructural confines to allow for the most direct route from point A to point B. This eliminates the ambiguity of choice and instead replaces it with acknowledging necessity. Efficiency becomes the paramount criteria in order to prolong or fortify existence.

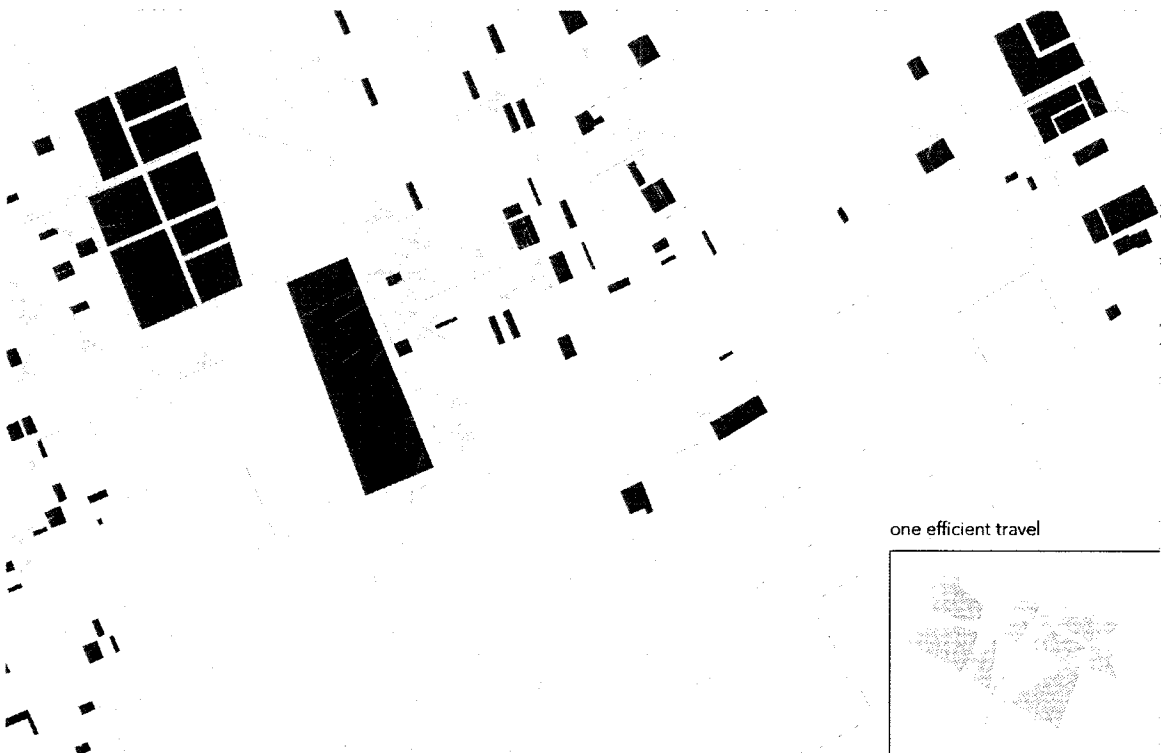
TRANSGRESSIVE PATH desire scar



CANONICAL PATH automotive array



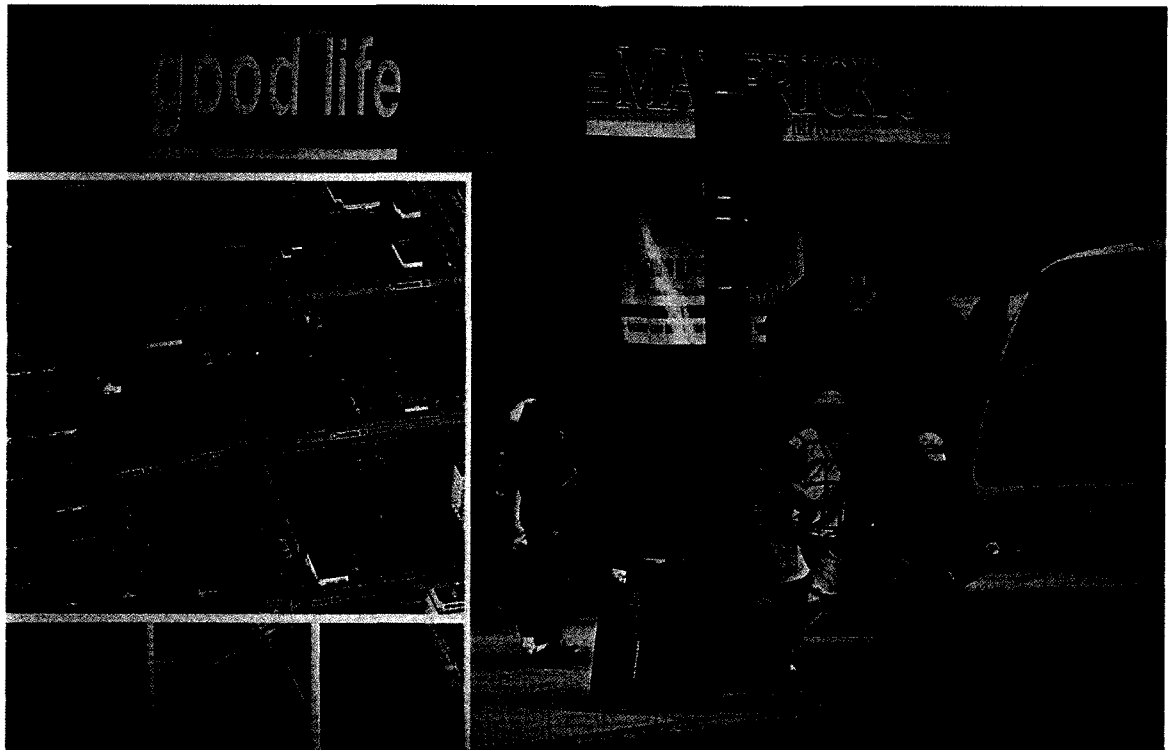
TRANSGRESSIVE PATH desire scar



## LOCAL NOMAD AGENT

The agent of the local nomad produces a desire scar after multiple trips to and from program beacons, such as home, church, work, convenience store, bus stop (as seen here), etc. Transgressive circulation is made possible by freeing oneself from the shackles of the automobile. This deviant circulation disregards dormant modern infrastructure and reveals itself as raw traces on the urban landscape seen in the aerial shots below. The local nomad is often too poor to be able to afford a car, so many of the beacons are defined by sustenance or travel. Unfortunately, these beacon are erratic or insufficient, forcing the local nomad to strengthen his/her resiliency and ability to operate with less.

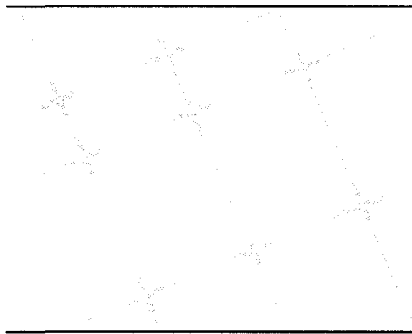
### CRITICAL CIRCULATION



## INTERSECTION URBAN CRITERIA

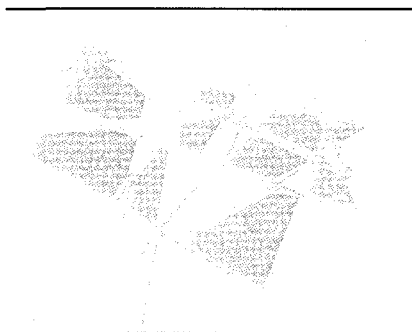
The canonical intersection is an ubiquitous by-product of an effective automotive array. As a by-product, it is a repetitive moment of undifferentiated sameness allowing for unbiased interchange. One interchange holds relatively no hierarchical importance over another interchange, nor over adjacent pieces of canonical urbanism. It is created by and restricted to the automobile.

CANONICAL INTERSECTION ubiquitous by-product

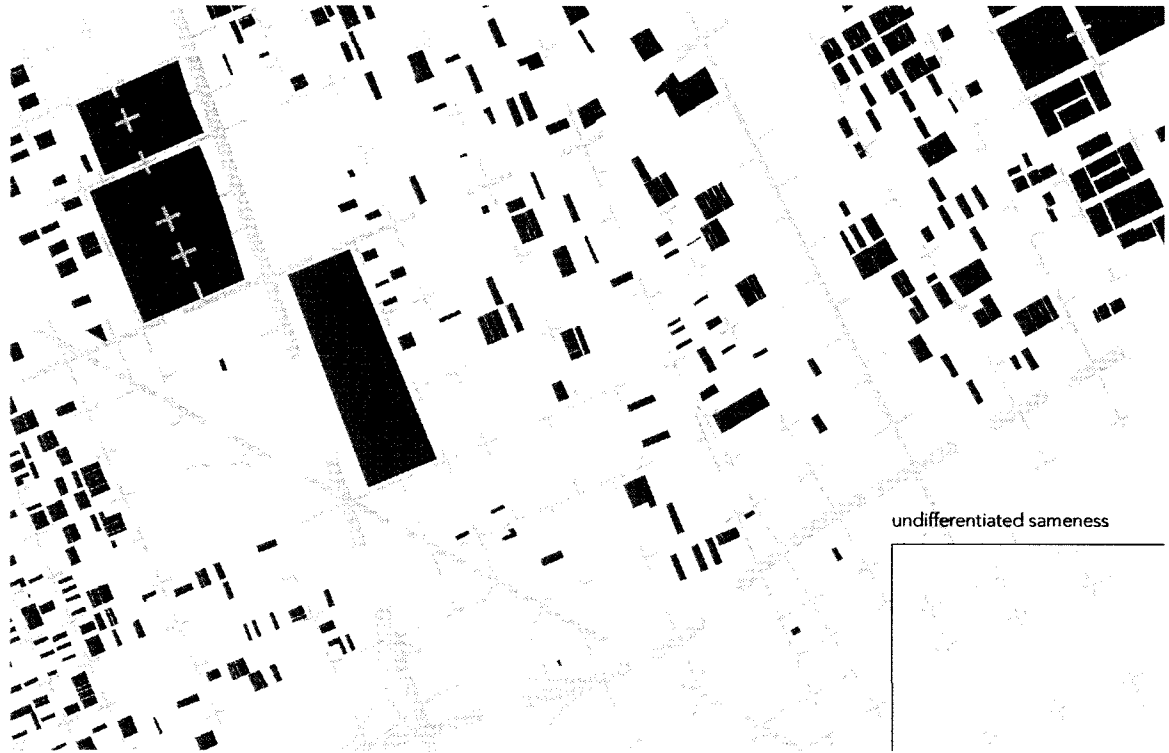


Yet, the transgressive intersection takes the form of a dynamic anchor, meaning each one is a unique resultant of two or more desire scars. These begin to give spatial definition to seemingly dormant adjacent territory that house informal social program. Since it is the intersection of multiple lines of necessity, it delineates common social ground between multiple individuals.

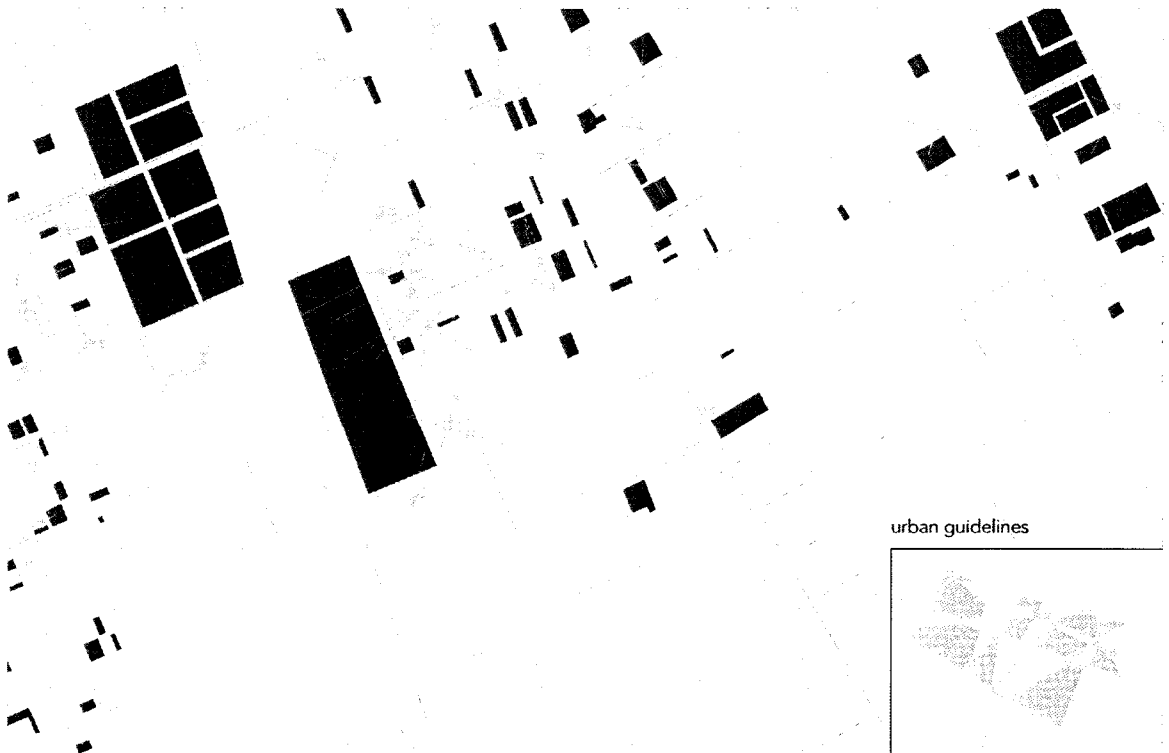
TRANSGRESSIVE INTERSECTION dynamic anchor



CANONICAL INTERSECTION ubiquitous by-product



TRANSGRESSIVE INTERSECTION dynamic anchor



## CAPITALIZED COMMUNITY AGENT

Capitalized community is the ability to take advantage of shared desires. The images shown below are the Heidelberg project on the east side of Detroit, which is one example of social program (in this case public art) flourishing by taking advantage of the circulation that accompanies a deviant intersection. The Site seen from above provides the feeling that an area as such emanates an almost magnetic draw to itself. This pull allows for program to flourish effectively and organization to grow from it. Other examples of capitalized community are such things as outdoor movie theatres, community gardens, informal recreational fields, and many others.

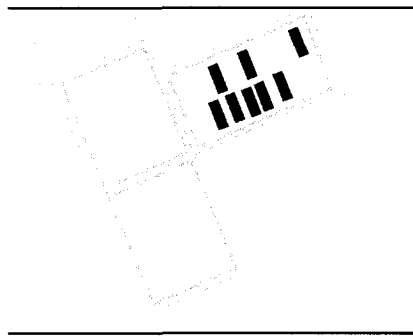
### SOCIAL CROSSROADS



## BLOCK URBAN CRITERIA

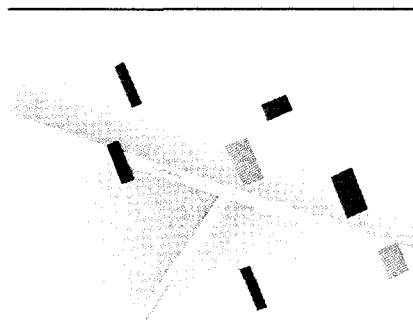
The canonical block is an impervious edge. With the proliferation and domination of the automotive array, the poche is left as a sequestered lots doomed to sole extrusion. Breaking the edge appears improbable at best. Program is only allowed to exist within the designated boundaries, otherwise it may threaten the ubiquity of the surrounding paths and intersections.

CANONICAL BLOCK impervious edge

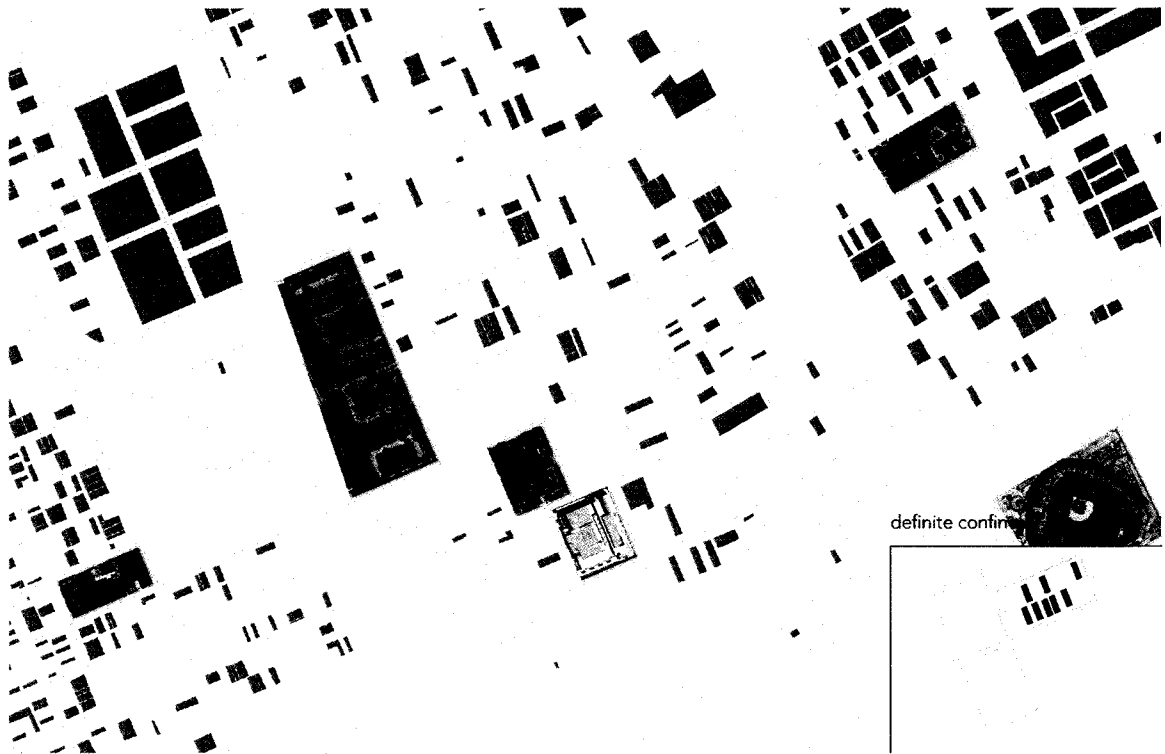


While the transgressive partner embraces a generative open bracket. With a genesis loosely defined by the dynamic anchor, the edged of the open bracket quickly fades allowing multiple territories to blur with one another. This mixing is made possible by disregarding the ineffective demarcations of the canonical and embracing incessant reach.

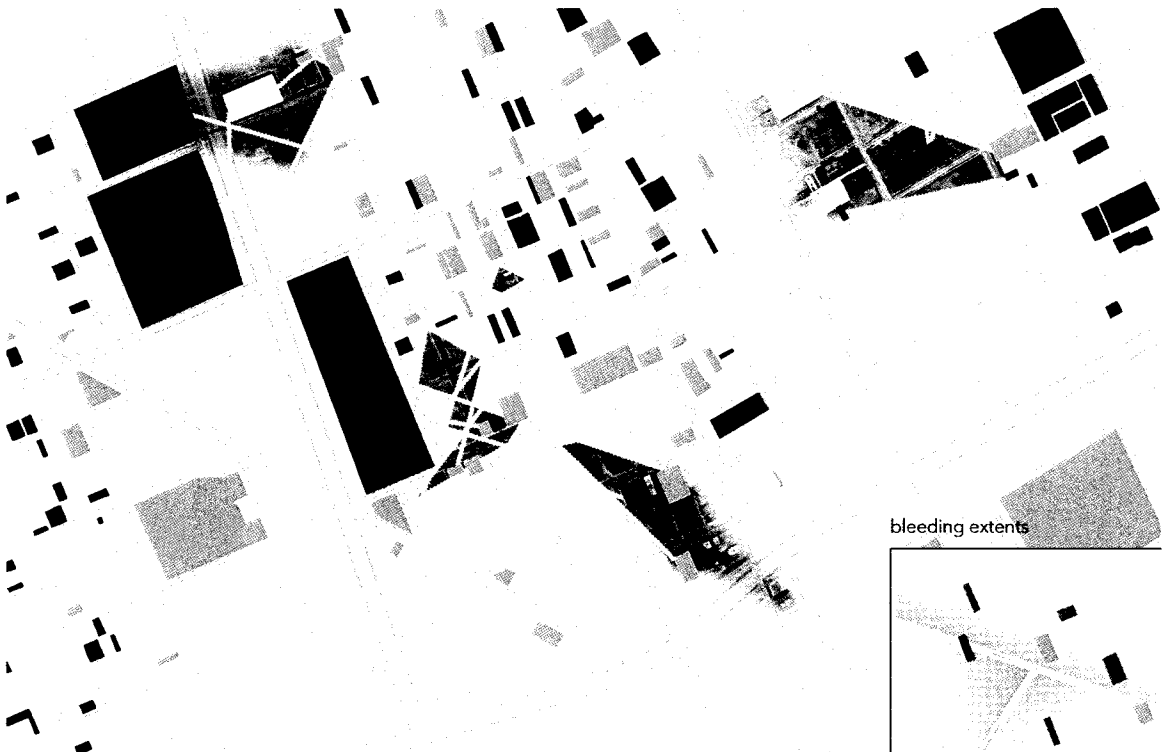
TRANSGRESSIVE BLOCK open bracket



CANONICAL BLOCK impervious edge



TRANSGRESSIVE BLOCK open bracket





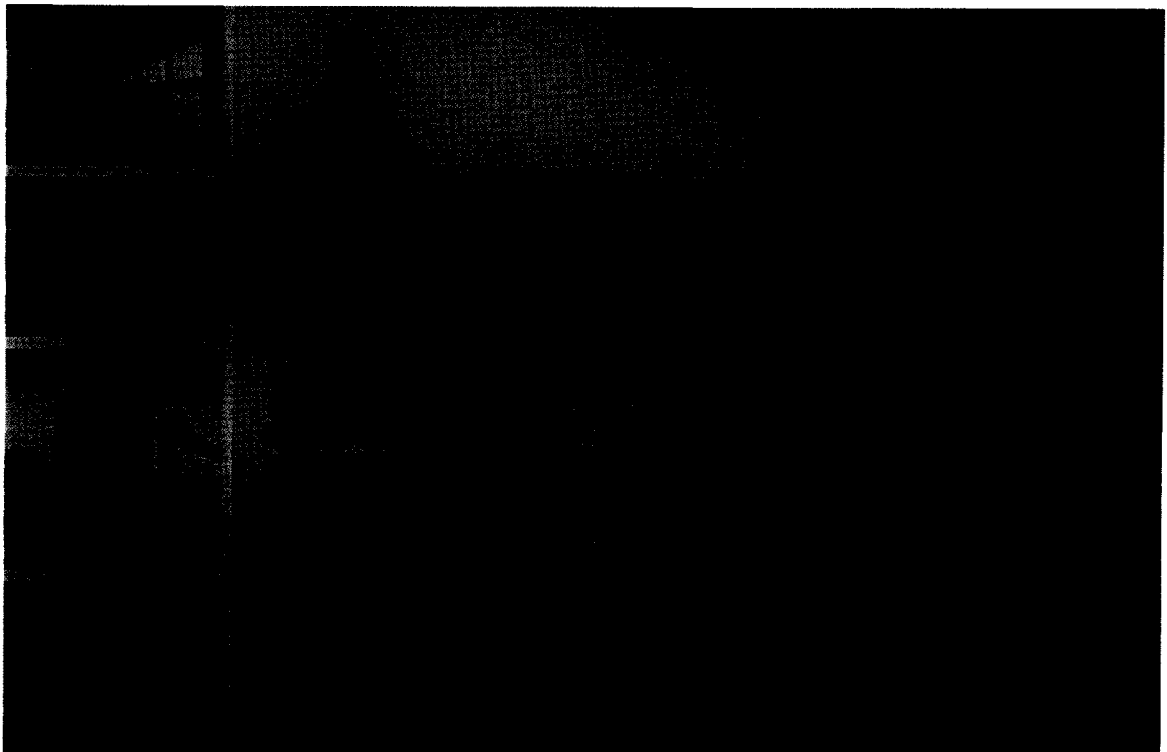
## URBAN EXODUS AGENT

This large scale territorial bleeding is made possible by the immense amount of vacant infrastructure, left behind from the urban exodus.

30% of the population has vacated Detroit over the span of the past 50 years

Therefore, there is little to curb the seeping nature of an open bracket. On the right is the St. Cyril Neighborhood in 2003. What used to be a densely populated school zone, now fights to be occupied at all. The left displays a few views of the hallowed infrastructure, and attest to the shear scale of the exodus of people and goods.

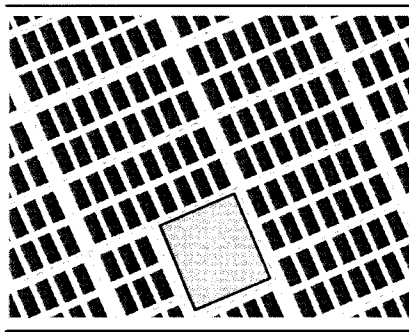
### HALLOWED INFRASTRUCTURE



## PARK URBAN CRITERIA

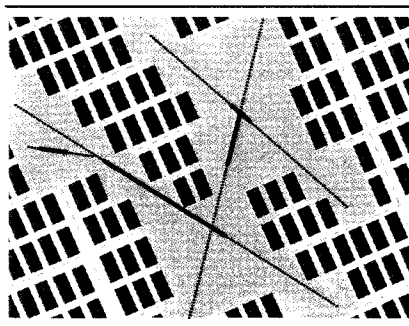
The canonical articulation of the park manifests as an artificial prisoner squashed against the imperious edge of the block. It is nature tailored to the whim of the urban gridlock. It is a punctuated afterthought as opposed to an integrated and contributing member. The canonical attempts to generalize and prototype the basic component of life.

CANONICAL PARK artificial prisoner

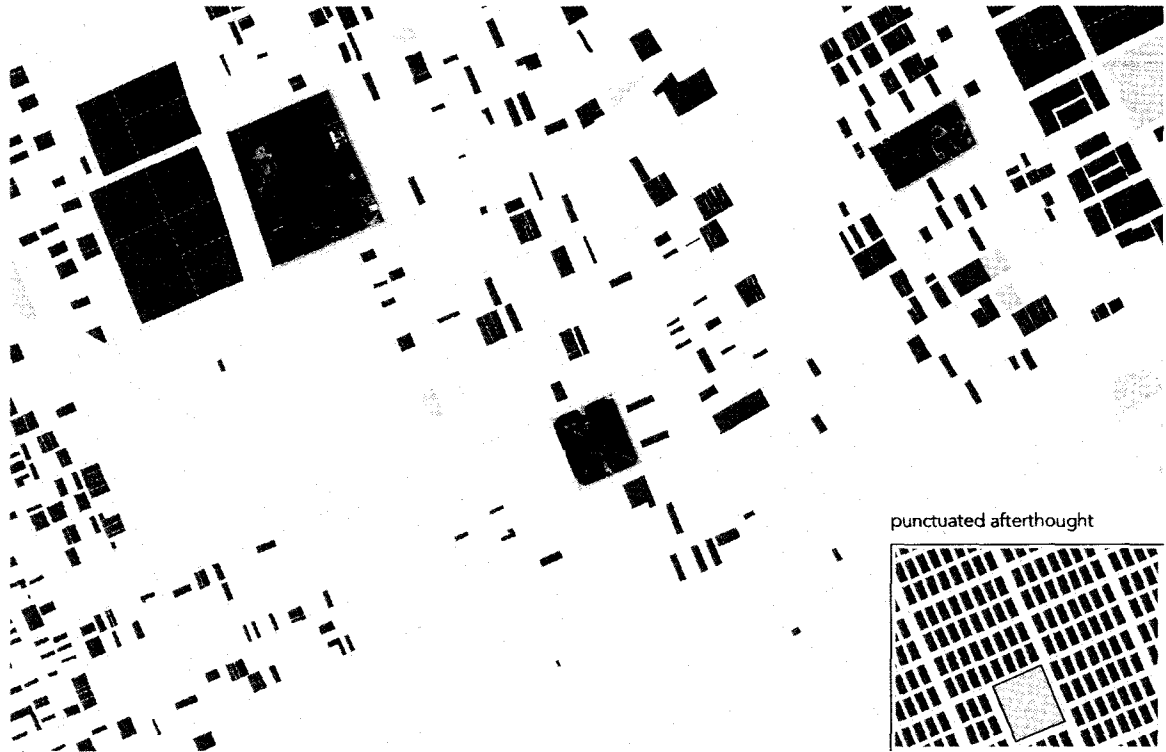


The transgressive park is an empowered natural trailblazer that adheres to no confines, and operates on terms of relentless reclamation. It produces a priming consumption that plows the way for desire scars to take hold. In a sense it plows the fields of edifice to allow for interaction and networking between transgressive circulations.

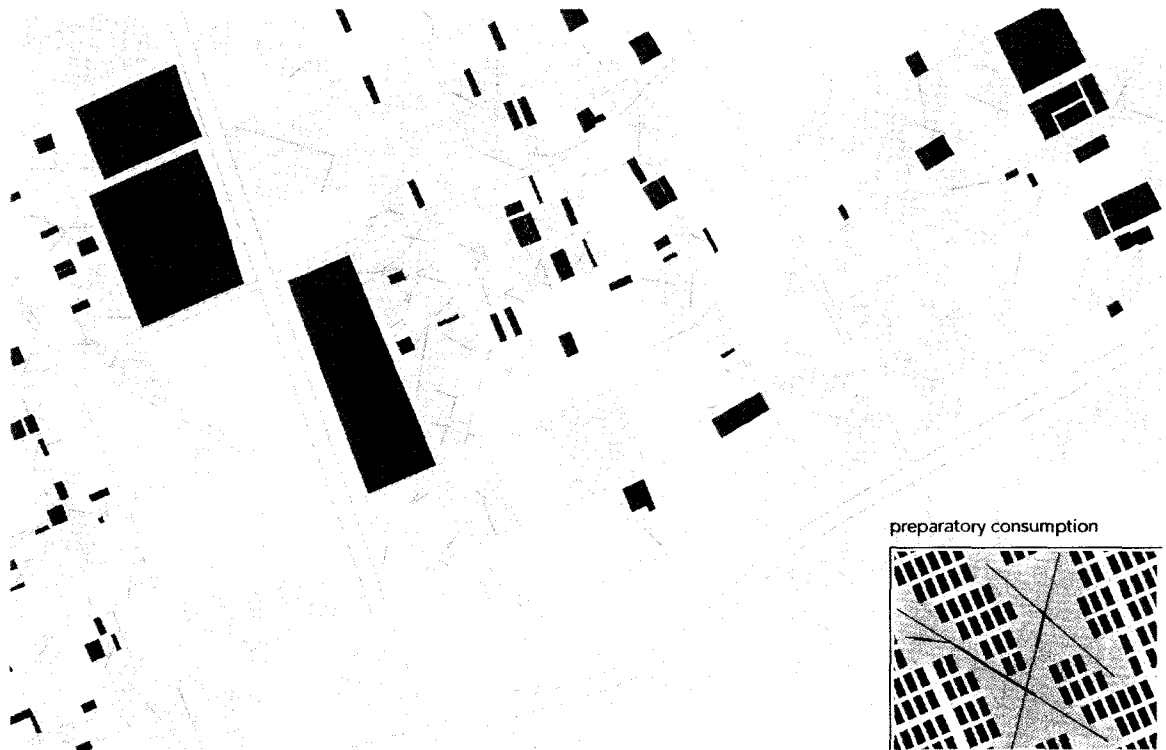
TRANSGRESSIVE PARK natural trailblazer



CANONICAL PARK artificial prisoner



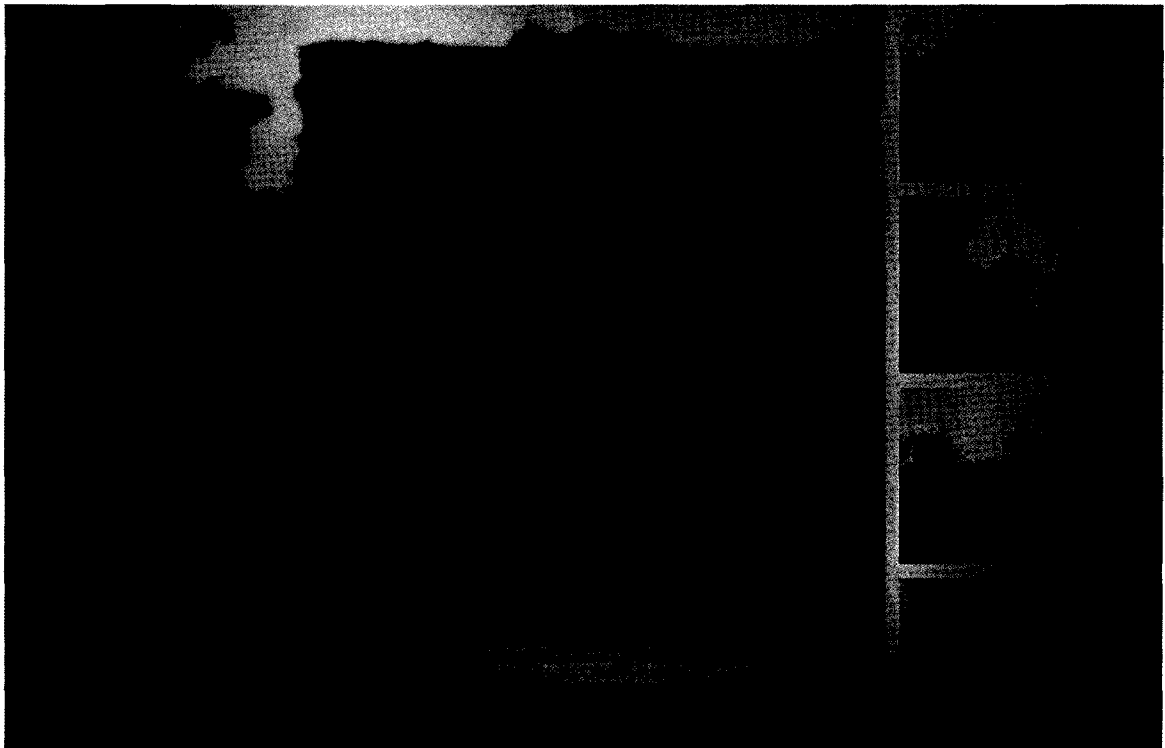
TRANSGRESSIVE PARK natural trailblazer



## BLANKET OVERGROWTH AGENT

The agent for this is blanket overgrowth. It is an indiscriminating covering that recycles the decay of the canonical. The brilliance of the blanket is that it has the ability to gather, combine, and connect multiple objects regardless of their type or origin. The perpetual nature of its growth aids in the bleeding of the transgressive block that partners the definition of desire scars. The images below are a describe the power of the adaptive and supple overgrowth as it engulfs the ruins of the failed rigidity of the canonical. What was intended as permanent is reconstituted by those congruent with change and temporality.

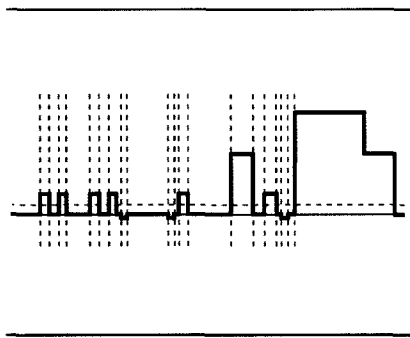
### INDISCRIMANATE BRIDGING



## SECTION URBAN CRITERIA

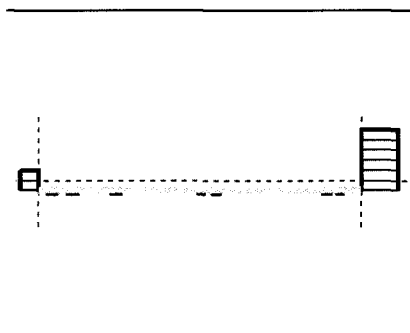
The canonical model promotes a city section with a numerous striated boundaries that act as advocates of the impervious edge. There is also the additional demarcation of a first floor public upper floors private within existing edifices. The section works to reinforce the canonicals ability to define and discriminate between the norm and the other.

CANONICAL SECTION striated boundaries

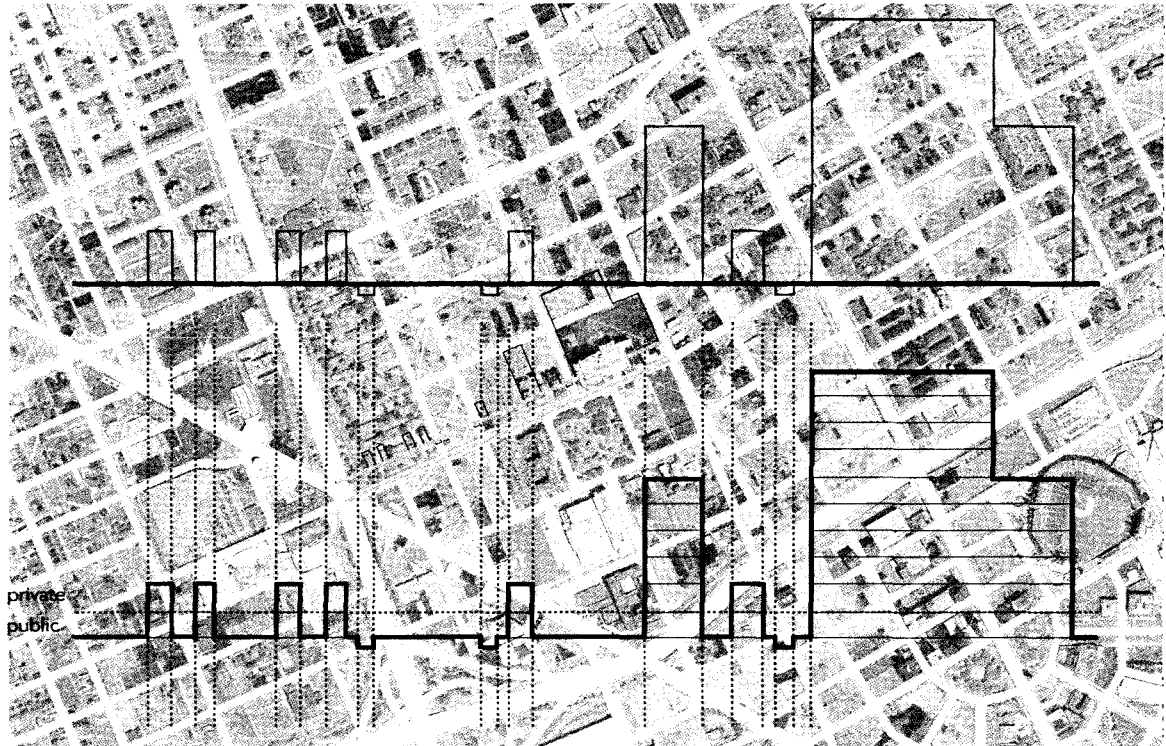


The transgressive counterpart is a coating of smoothed fabric that removes the thresholds of the impervious edge. While mapping the current deviant conditions, I realized this does not address equal access in the vertical dimension, and began to project the smoothing as a sectional device that starts to accelerate one of the many early transgressive tools.

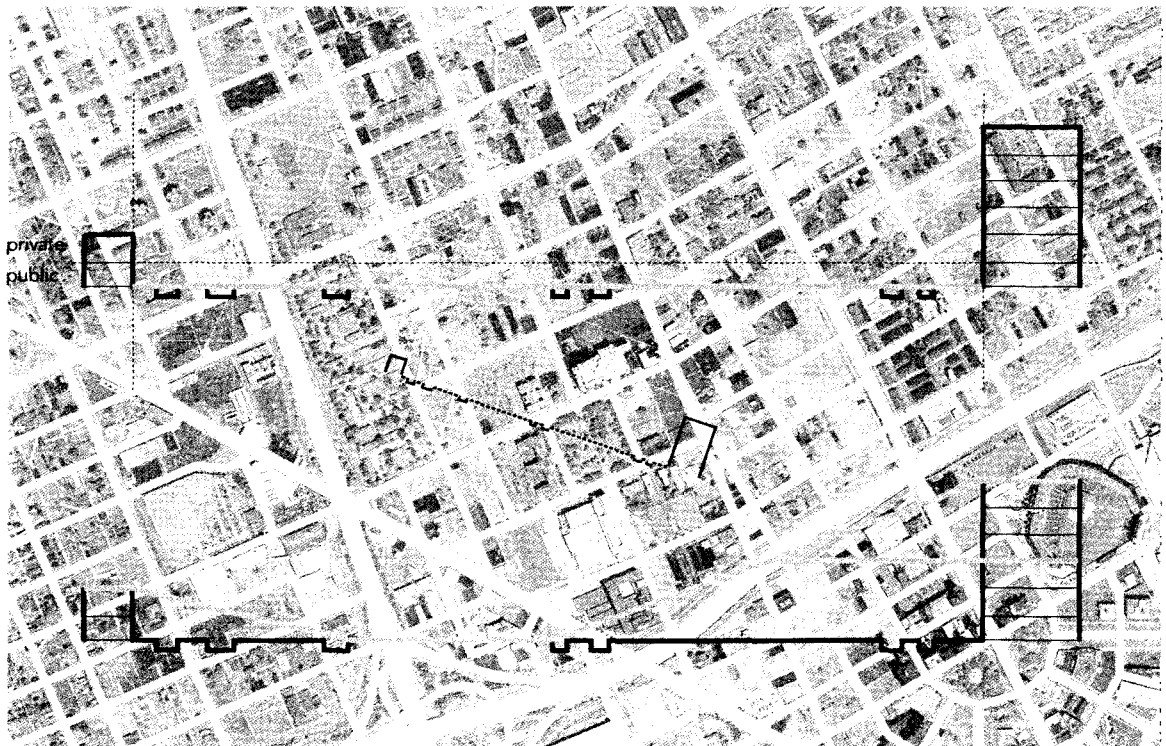
TRANSGRESSIVE SECTION smoothed fabric



CANONICAL SECTION striated boundaries



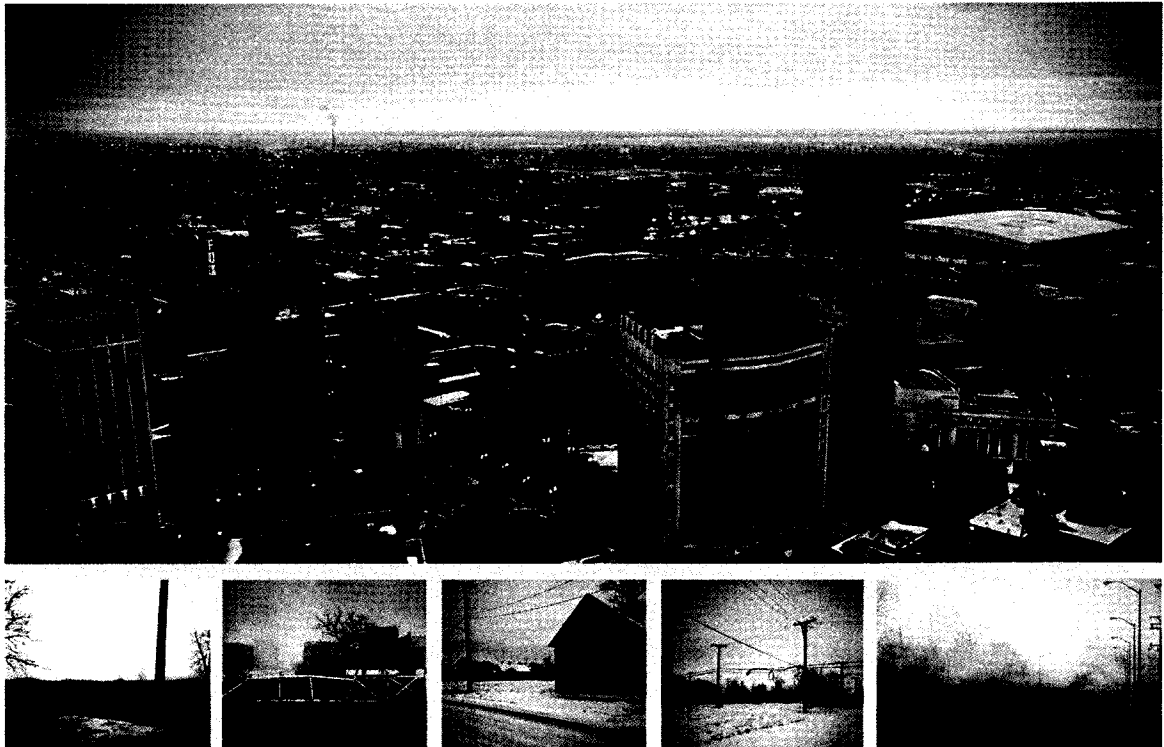
TRANSGRESSIVE SECTION smoothed fabric



## CONDITIONAL BLACKOUT AGENT

The agent of smoothing is conditional blackouts such as snow, fog, darkness, and many more that begin to eliminate expected canonical demarcations such as road, sidewalk, floor, etc. In the winter Detroit has little money to clear roads of snow, so the ideological gridiron diminishes, to reveal an unbiased field. That unbiased nature aids in the transgressive sections talent for augmenting continuity between objects that typically acts as dividers. In a blackout out, all the buildings and buildings floors that typically read as autonomous units share a piercing absence of light, binding them under a new definition/identity and a new alliance.

### DEMARCATIION ERASURE



## SELF IMAGE URBAN IDENTITY

In addition to the 5 urbanistic tools, there is one major issue in the conception of a city: the location of image. The canonical image collectively caters to external expectations and is commodified for an outside audience (as seen by Detroit's unphased dedication to the automotive industry). The image is the new chevy volt. Attractive at 230 miles to the gallon yet unattainable at a price tag of \$40,000. Returning to the poverty crisis ravaging Detroit, not only can the masses not afford the automobile, but if they could, the majority do not own a garage necessary to charge its electrical batteries. Its a shiny new design that hovers untouched above the dilapidated actuality of the city. There is a severe knowledge gap between the local image that escapes its place of production. The city tirelessly promotes an image of servitude as opposed to personal desire.

### CANONICAL IMAGE

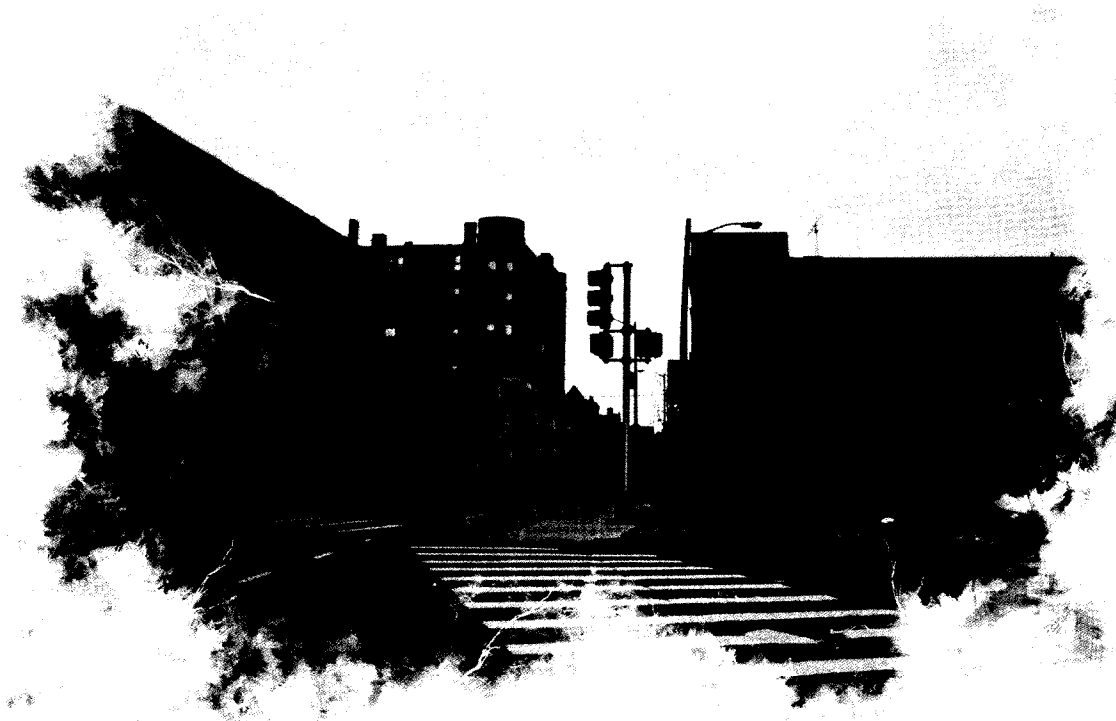




The transgressive image, on the other hand, is desire driven and to each his/her own. What they want the city to be and where they fit in it becomes a personal playground of imagination and experimentation, where multiple images continually overlay, negate, build on, and blur previous attempts. Recently the city has engaged an initiative to incentivize film production in Detroit. The city gives a 42% cash rebate, which is the most aggressive film and tv incentive in the country. It has been rather successful partnering in the fact that it is an image that engages exterior funding and the revitalization of dormant infrastructure. Interestingly enough each film builds on the artifacts of previous images and leaves their own for future integration. Here is the restaurant "The Oink Joint" which was augmented and gained notoriety from the film Whip It. The previously unknown eatery now remains a popular artifact long after the film finished shooting and the celebrities have disappeared.

#### TRANSGRESSIVE IMAGE



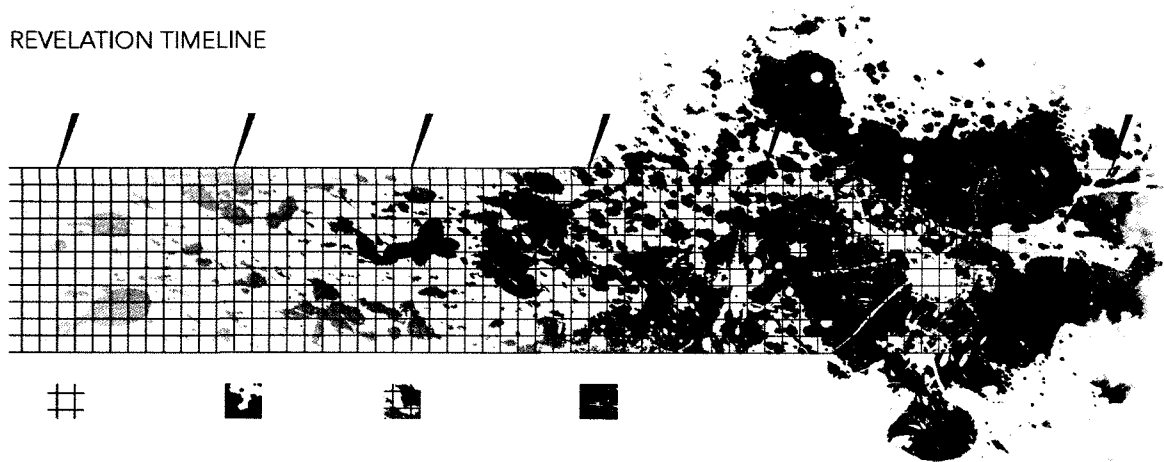


CASS AVENUE cass corridor

# ACCELERATED URBANISM chapter 3

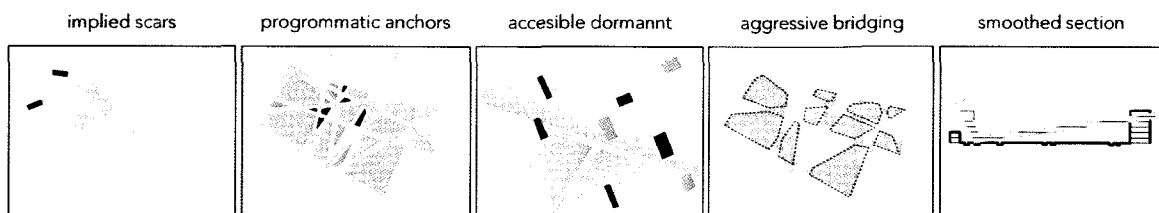
Such an investigation led me to realize that the condition of Detroit was not one of "either/or" (Canonical vs, Transgressive), but a relationship of repression. This is a conceptual timeline that exposes the matter that Detroit's Urbanism has always been one of play between the two forces. It just depends on which one is expressed. In the 1950's The canonical urbanism was in full swing, pressuring the deviance into repression, but the timeline shows a shift. If one looks at the 21st century they will see a much more vocal transgressive urbanism. My goal is to allow the cohabitation of both models allowing each to be expressed when advantageous for the people of the city.

REVELATION TIMELINE



Expressive transgressive urbanism utilizes the tools of implied scars, programmatic anchors, accessible dormant, aggressive bridging, and smoothed section.

EMMERGENT TECHNIQUES

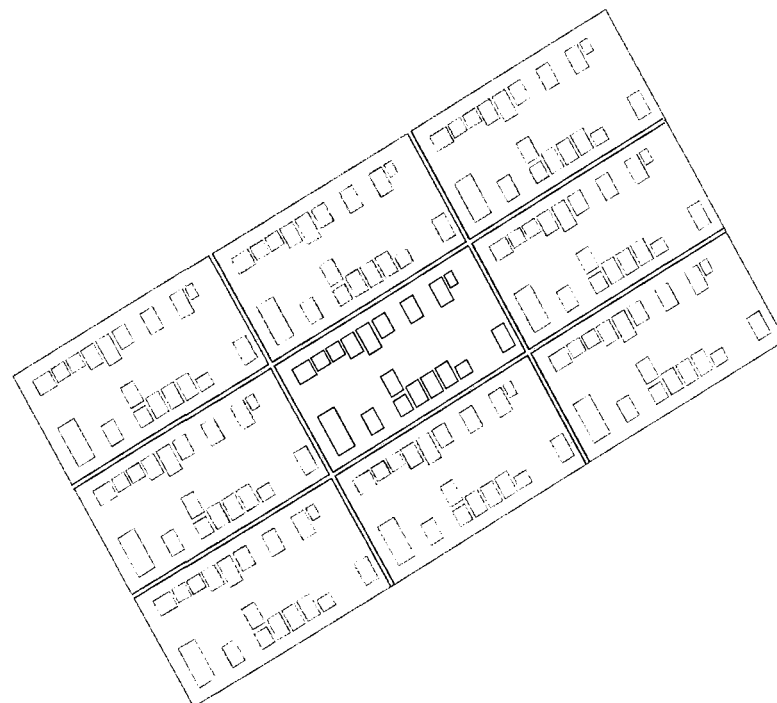


## TRANSGRESSIVE GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

To understand the implementation and growth of the accelerated deviance, we first look at the ideal canonical conditions. Here is the typical organization of the sequestering streets. The block boast a high occupancy rate, which are all equally accessed by the numerous surrounding streets.

Unfortunately, the reality of Detroit is that the properties begin to fall vacant and demolition (of all colors) ensues, avenues for transgressive paths spring forth. The evacuation continues as understood to uncover the inefficiencies of the unoccupied streets. What was once served by 2,3,4 paved roads, is now engaged by a single desire scar. With the solidification of the efficient circulation routes, new program begins to attach itself to the new areas of high traffic (especially near the intersections).

### CANONICAL IDEAL



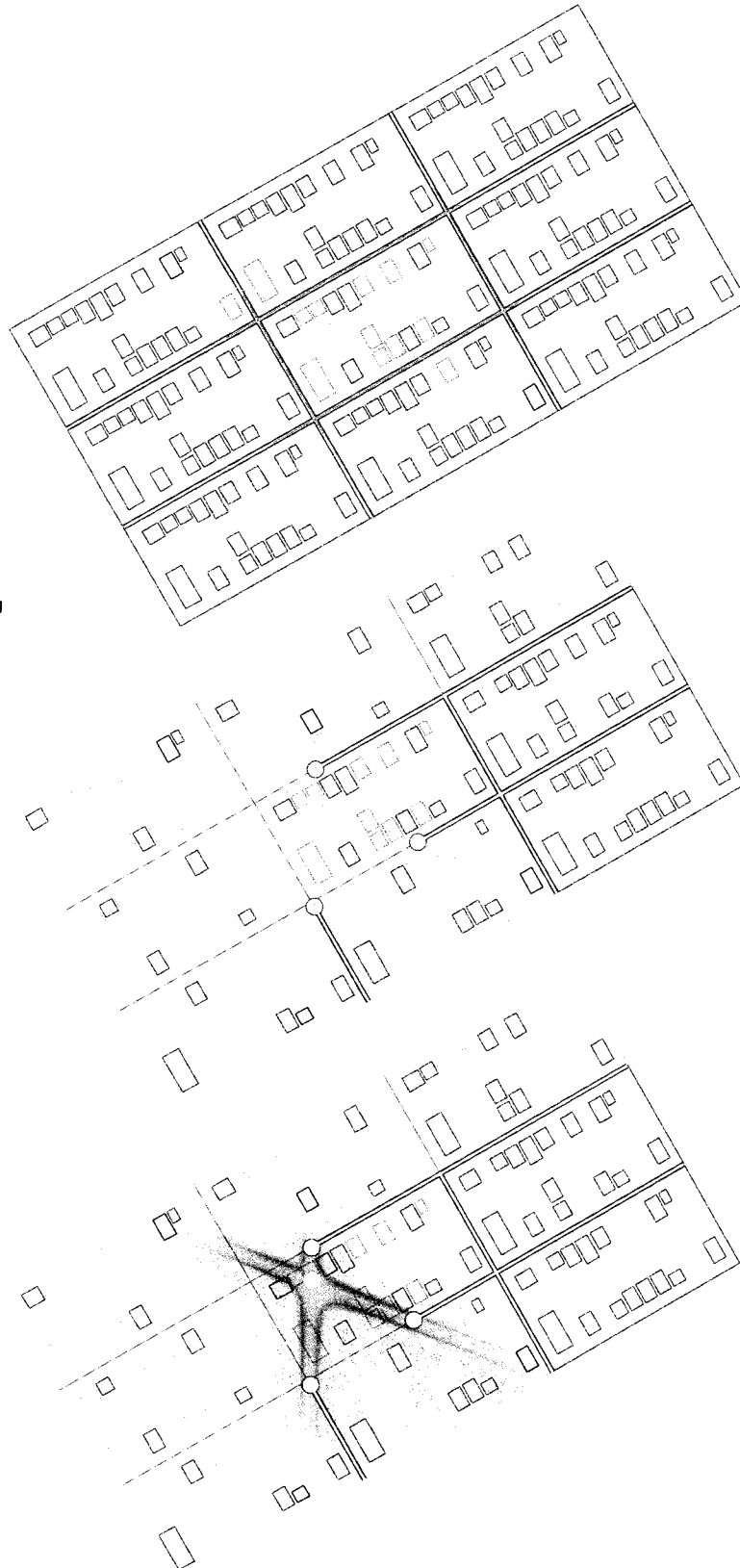
equal access

## OPPORTUNISTIC TRANSGRESSION

advantageous scarring

efficient collapsing

program densification

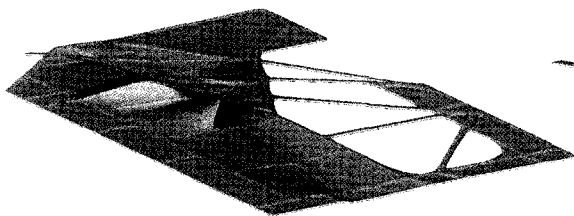


## PRODUCTIVE SURFACE IMPLEMENTATION

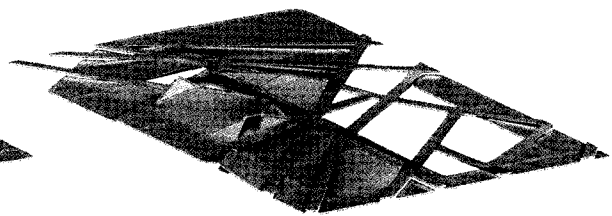
The new infrastructure is formed out of the communication between a pedestrian based route, and a higher speed bicycle circulation. A productive surface smooths the 2 together to increase continuity among not only several now implied scars but several speeds also. Change in elevations along the surfaces articulates the flux in programmatic intensities. The surfaces peak at predominant transgressive intersections, hence the local being a dynamic anchor to programmatic growth and thickening.

Taking a closer look at the productive surface, one can see the introduction of depth over plasticity. First, the residents circulate freely atop the productive surface. Then when the smoothing between the two speeds occurs an interstitial pocket is activated, allowing for new program to infill. The new programs can range across the entire spectrum including urban farming and/or office.

### ACTIVE DEPTH



low speed pedestrian scars



high speed cyclist scars

### ACTIVE DEPTH



circulation surface



engaged interstitial



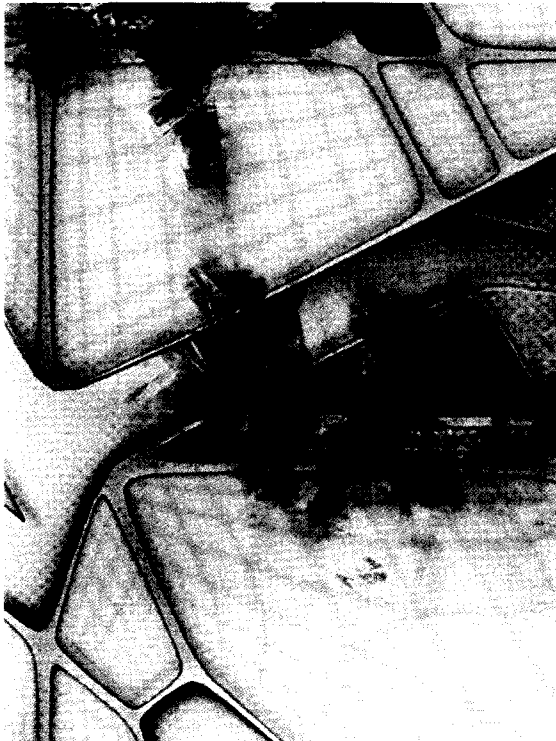
interstitial program

## AGGRESSIVE PLANNING IMPLEMENTATION

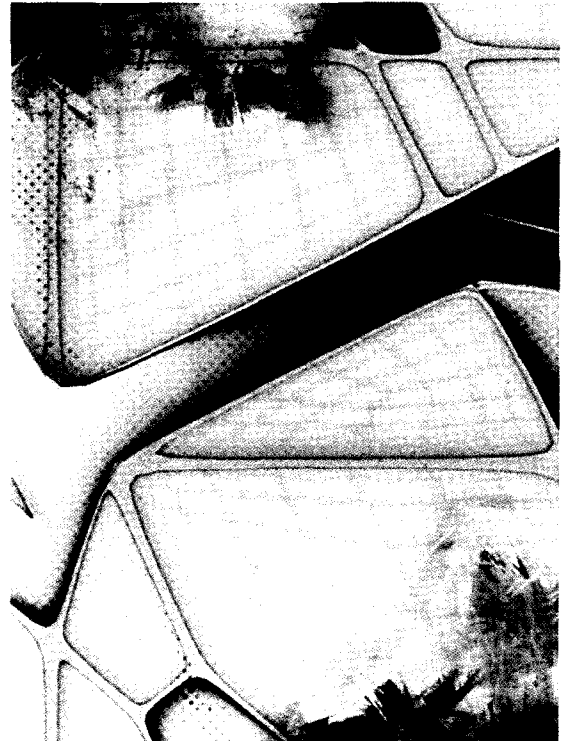
In the early stages some of the desire scars begin to take hold within the urban fabric. Between them there is a productive surface/webbing growing to create more egalitarian use and access to the interstitial pockets. Multiple desire scars intersect to create erupting elevations joined by magnetic corner stones. Here food production and distribution begin to thrive, feeding the new collective.

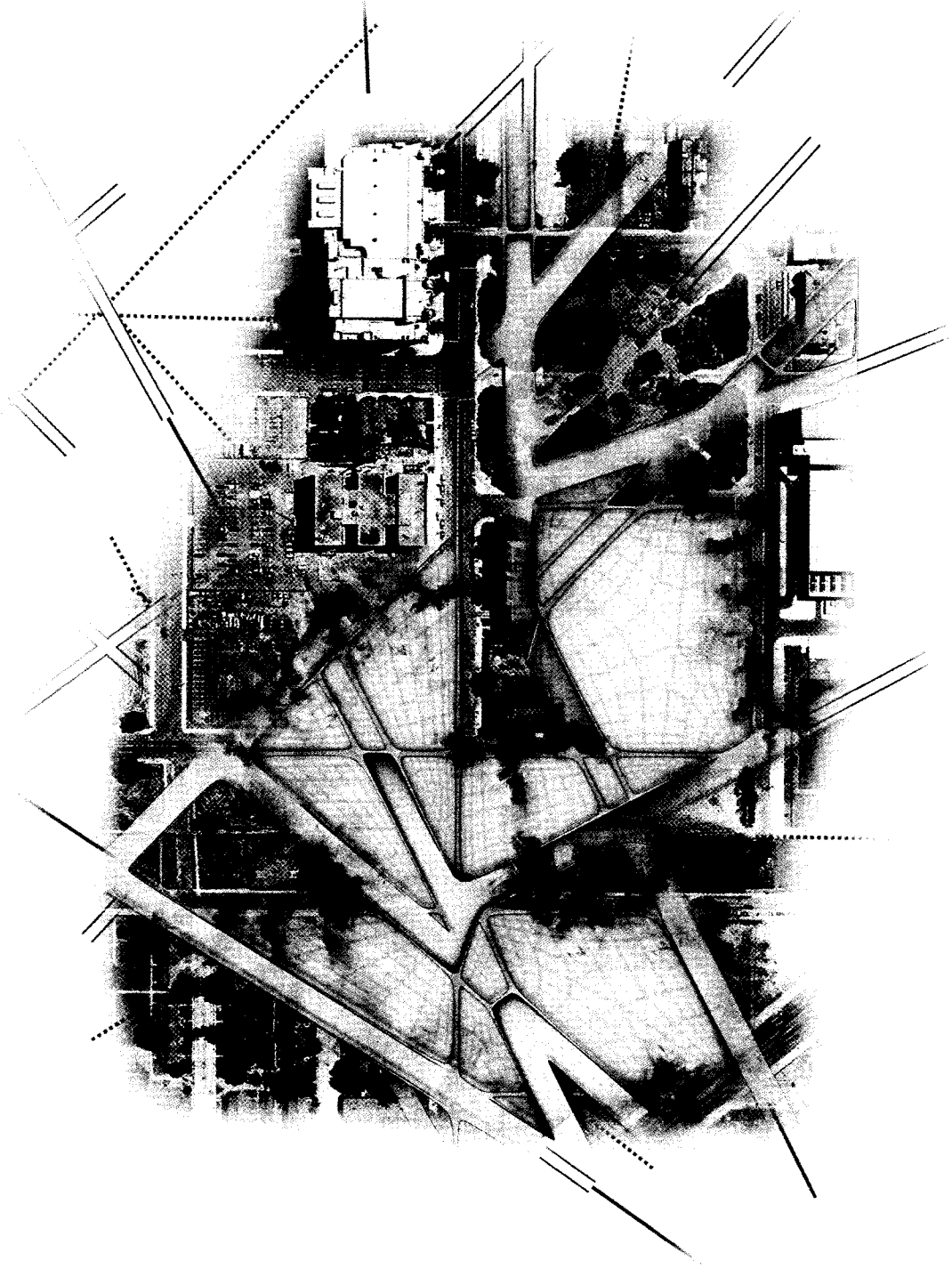
Later on, the transgressive model is taking more control of the urban fabric. The canonical model still operates below and even the geometry of the deviant is based on the lurking gridiron. However, this area of Detroit calls for expressive transgression. Therefore the following images articulate a high presence of the new productive surfaces

PRODUCTIVE WEBBING



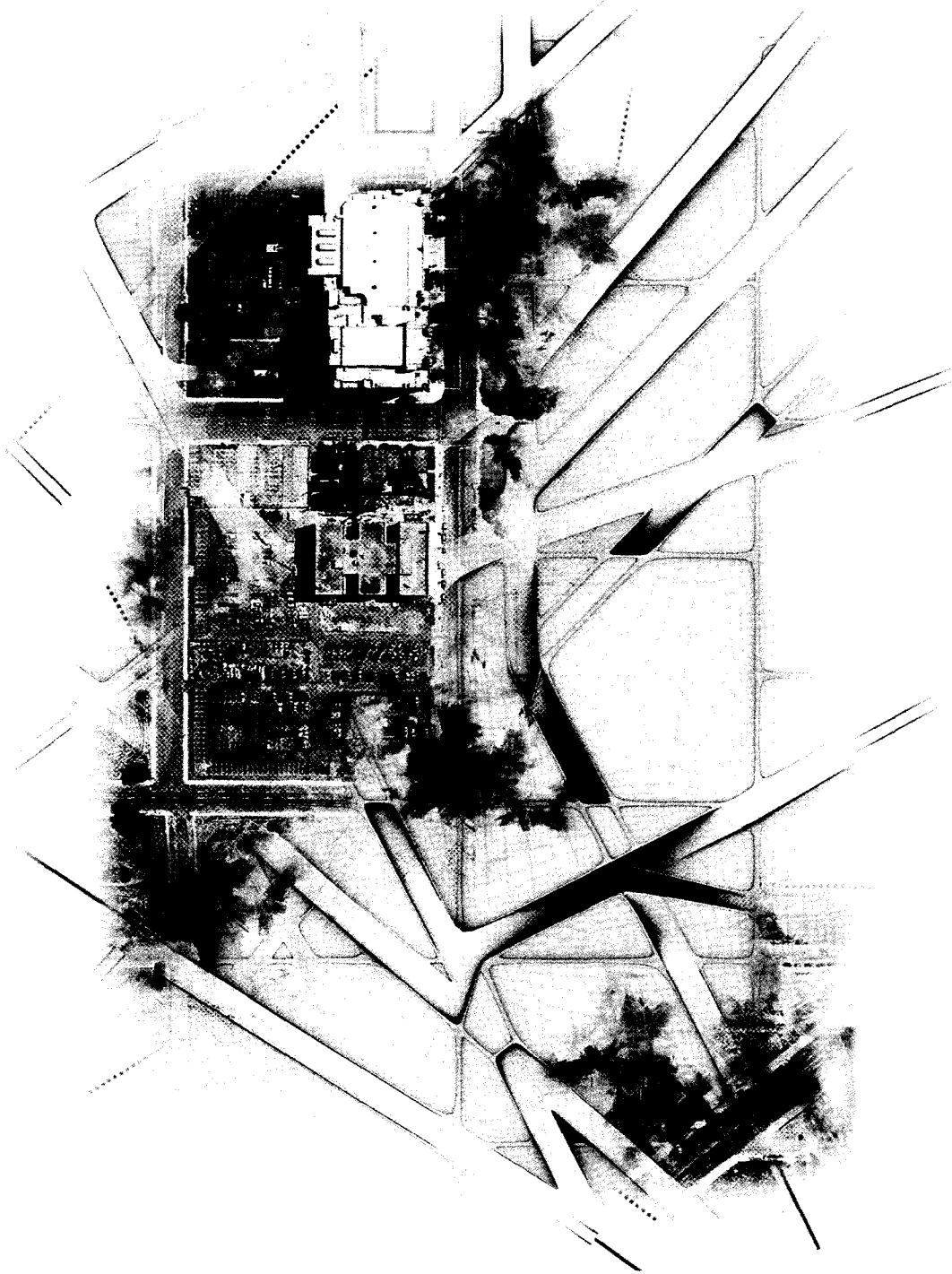
PRODUCTIVE SURFACE





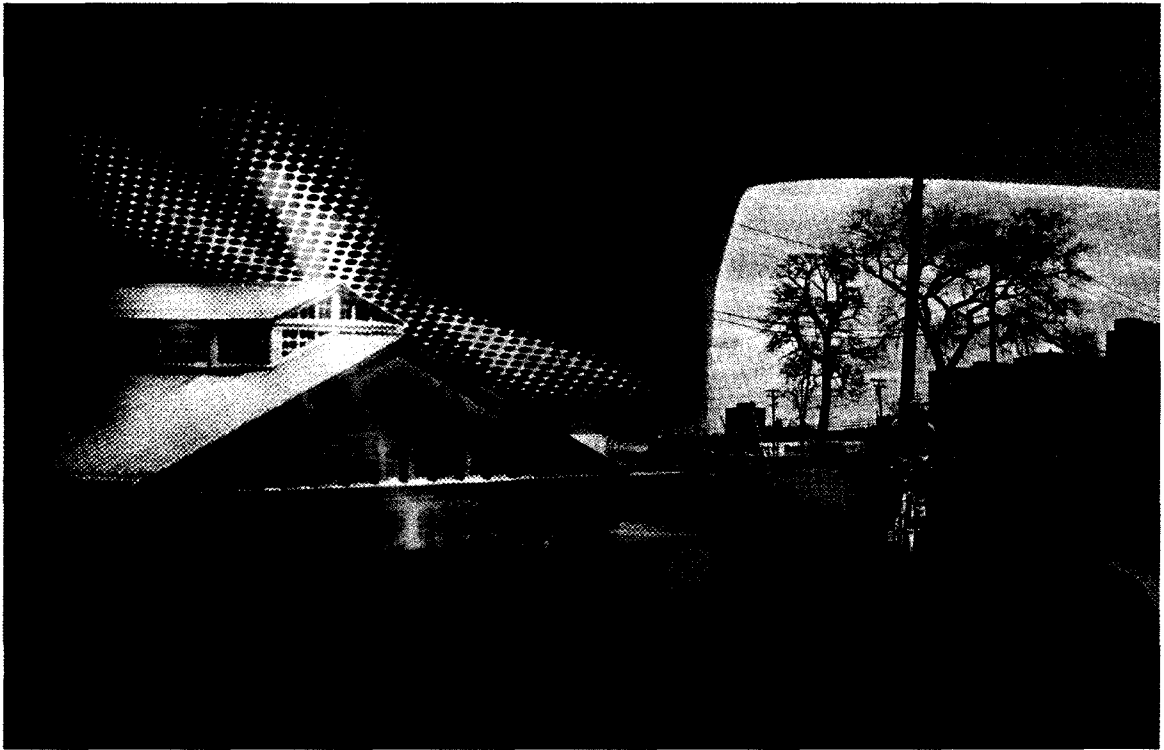
EARLY ROOTS





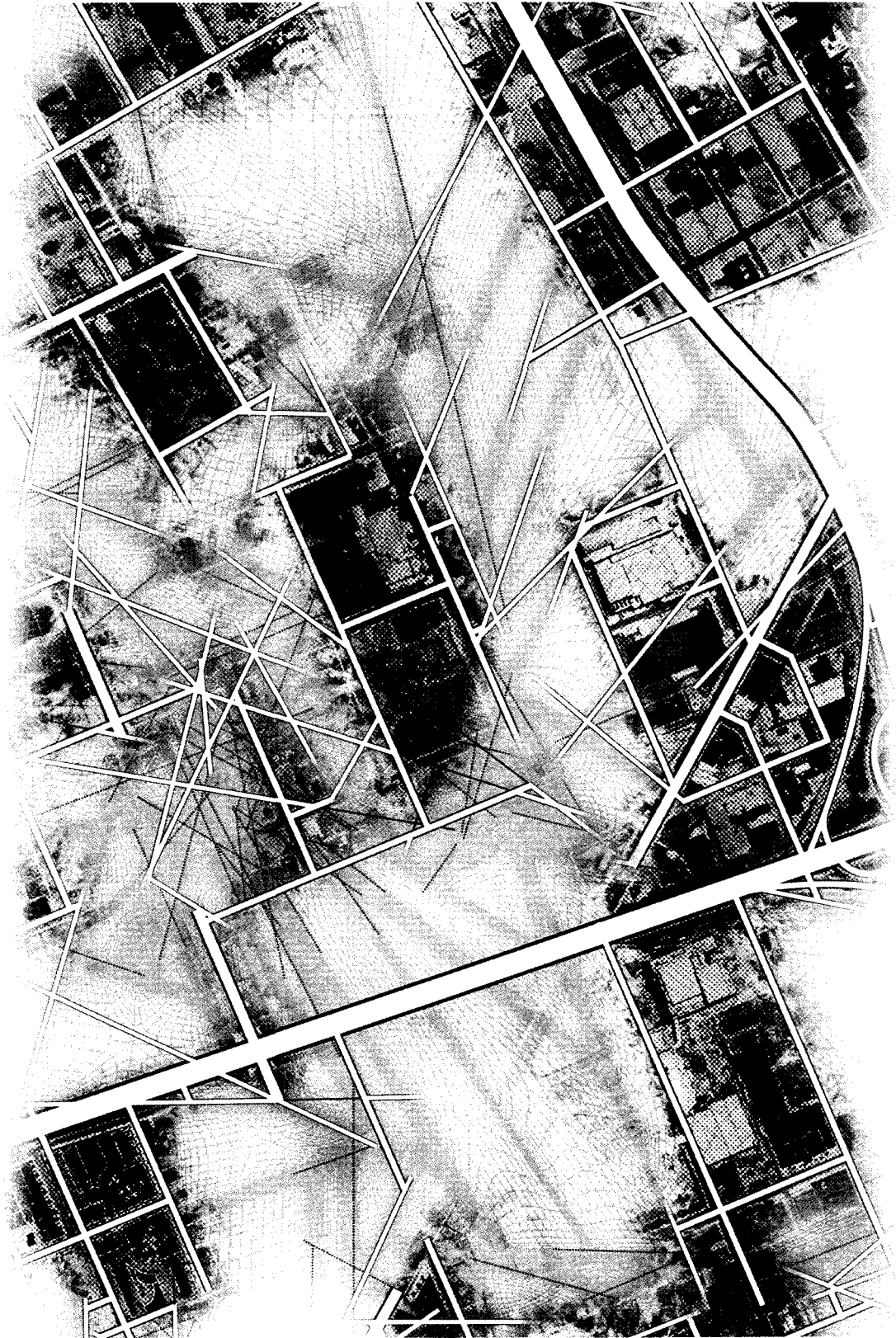
SUBSTANTIAL PRESENCE

## DORMANT REFRAMING



This image demonstrates how the high speed route can file to reframe and reaccess dormant infrastructure lying amongst its growth. This is a prime example of the canonical acting in a repressed manner, and giving way to eager transgressive urbanism.

The two types of urbanism are shown cohabitating in this last image. The operation of the city is multi-faceted as opposed to unidirectional. Detroit was built on the modern model of production, but now thrives on the multiple levels of reality. The groundwork of the contemporary image has been laid, and it has manifested an continual unforeseen reinterpretation. Out of this and alongside the norm a new urbanism has grown from looking at the way people actually inhabit intentions. Spurring a new collective. One based not on the private and divisions, but a collective of access and collaboration.



COLLABORATIVE URBANISM



2ND AVENUE cass corridor

# INFORMATIVE LEAPS

Along the investigation into a Detroit-centric urbanism, I was forced to take several leaps of what Detroit will, may, or might become. All flew sufficiently off course, but what they did do is tell me what *[D]Urbanism* is not. From the multitude, 2 echo their importance.

DETROIT IS NOT A TABULA RASA. No matter how many open fields and vacant lots one can count, it is not a clean slate. It is terrain vague. It is a homeless encampment. It is a pedestrian shortcut. It is integral.

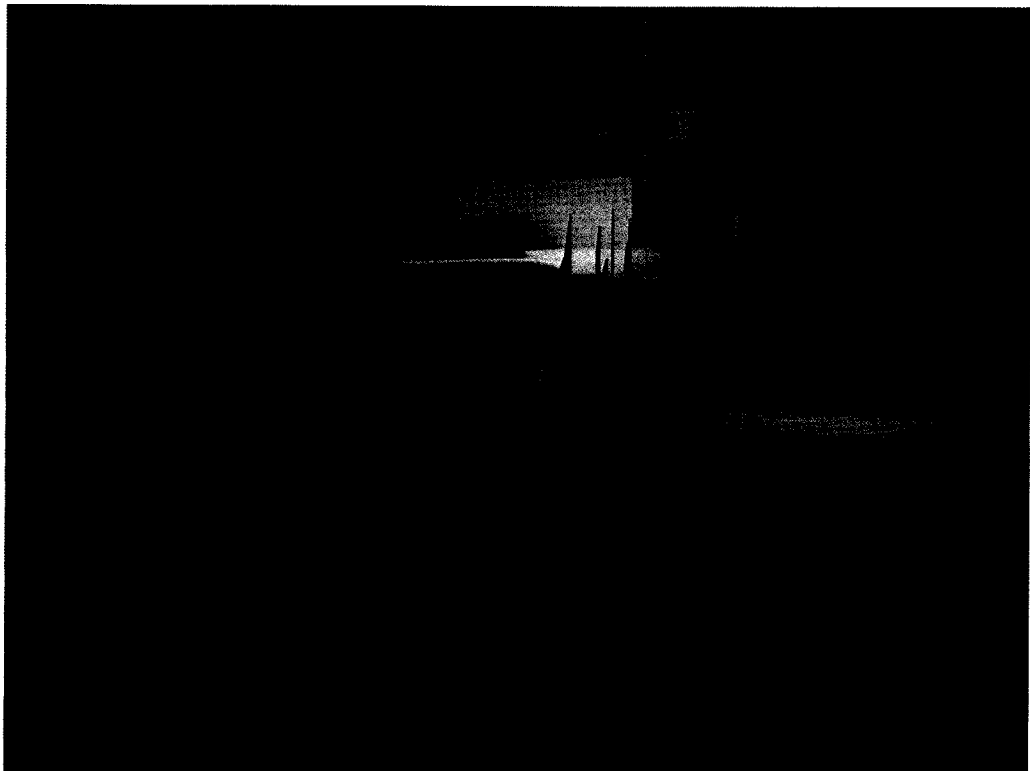
TOO FAR GONE



TOO OBVIOUS



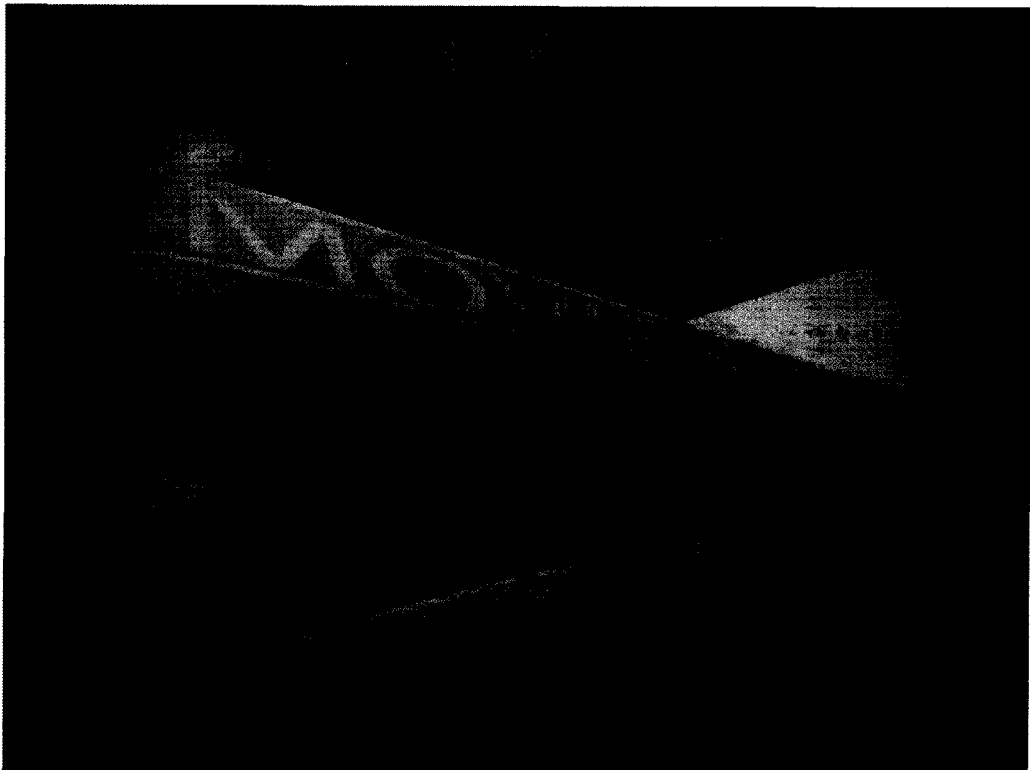
TOO BLACK OR WHITE



TOO BLEAK

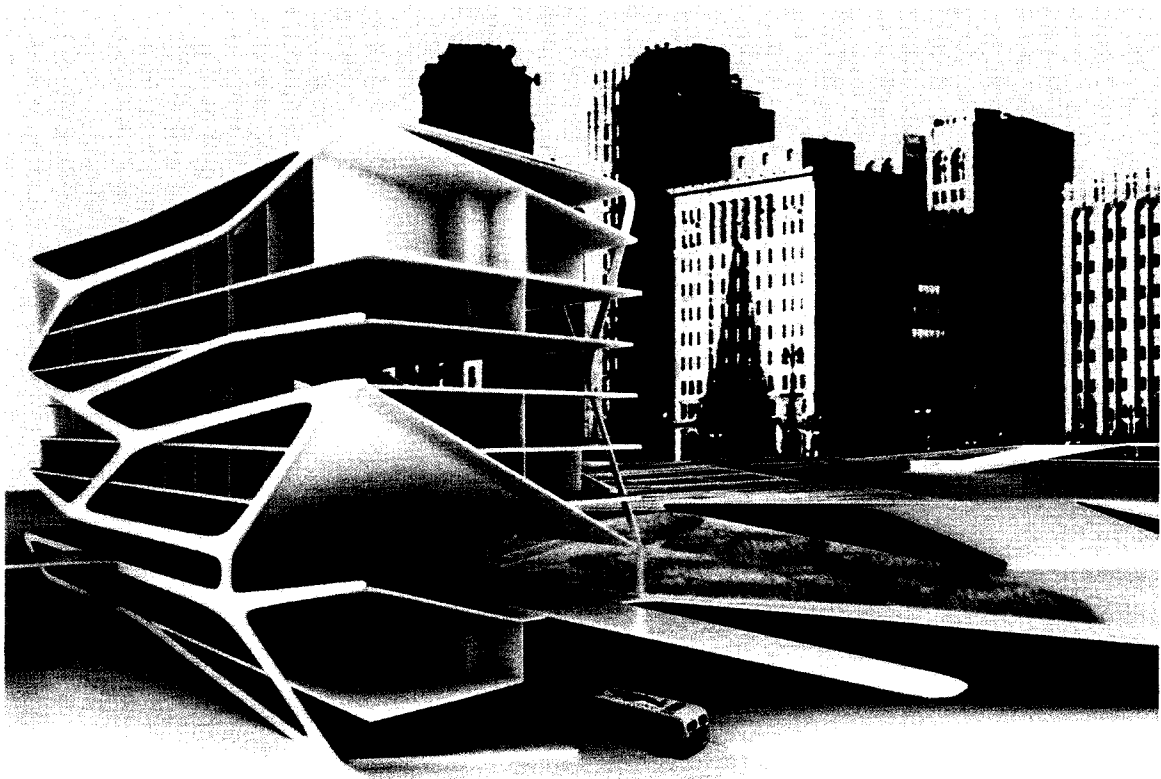


TOO OTHER



DETROIT DOES NOT NEED TO BE SAVED. This crusade for the magic cure for the city's woes are misguided at best. Every answer is the insertion of some kind of external catalyst. "Casinos work in Las Vegas, Why not Detroit?" The city is littered with the non-critical remnants of failed retooling efforts that all mimic distant contemporaries. If the movie industry takes a liking to Detroit, then that is great. But do not hand the keys to the city over. Their participation will layer into the quilted identity of Detroit, not imprison it. The quick fix and that which is different always looks so appetizing, but more times than not the answer sprouts from within. Detroit will never be what it was, but why is that what we are asking of it?

TOO FOCUSED





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